

## **'WITH SHOUTS OF AFRIKA !': The 1952 Textile Strike at Good Hope Textiles, King William's Town.**

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*This paper, through a detailed examination of one of the biggest and most significant strikes in the East London region, suggests its importance lies both in the events and processes of the strike itself, and in its longer term impact on political traditions of union and popular struggle. It argues that a dynamic relationship developed between a newly emergent industrial working class in the textile industry, and an equally rapidly established local ATWIU, and local ANC branch. This resulted in the merging of a pattern of worker discontent and strike action with the ANC's Defiance Campaign in particular, and in so doing, the nature and direction of the strike was transformed. Finally it is argued that the defeat of this 'mass' strike of defiance by the textile workers, laid the patterns and built the disillusion of future labour struggles in the region.*

Shouts of 'Afrika!' and the thumb-up sign of the passive resistance movement among Natives (sic) were heard in King William's Town for the first time yesterday morning when a crowd of Natives gathered in front of the Magistrate's Court in Alexandria Road, following the arrest on Saturday of 53 Native men at Zwelitsha charged with taking part in a strike at the Good Hope Textile Corporation's factory. The demonstrators faced a party of Police constables armed with riot sticks and sten guns. Nearby a large crowd of excited Natives gathered quickly to observe the scene. European pedestrians stopped to watch and office workers nearby also looked on (*Daily Dispatch* 16/9/1952).

The strike began on Friday afternoon, 22 August 1952, when 'C' shift (4pm to midnight) workers stopped work between 4 and 5pm. 250 workers switched off their machines, gathered outside the factory gates and then marched into Zwelitsha, 'chanting and singing'. Under the bluegum trees next to the factory, the voices of the strike carried over the open veld to the factory gates where supervisors and managers had gathered as illiterate spectators to the unfolding drama. The play was in Xhosa, their language English. Even the action, however, was incomprehensible. . .

### **THE COMPANY VIEW: CONSTRUCTIVE APARTHEID VERSUS RACIAL EXPLOITATION.**

It was only after the second world war that textiles became a major sector of manufacturing industry in South Africa (Hirsch, 1978). Expansion in the East London-King William's Town region was no exception, and the establishment of Good Hope Textile Corporation (GHT) was central to this expansion. Mager [1987: 65-76] has detailed the growth in the 1930's of the natural fibre and cloth manufacturing sector of this (textile) industry in the region, and the strains, and transformations of existing production relations that occurred during world war two. Central to this process was the changeover from large-

ly female European labour, to African male labour. It was on this foundation that GHT was to be established.

By the mid 1940's, with a view to promoting South Africa's industrialisation and reducing imports (in 1948 textiles constituted between 20 and 25% of imports to the Union) the

'SA government embarked . . . on a programme of actively fostering the expansion of textile production'. The IDC primed the pump by putting up several million pounds worth of capital and found ready collaborators in a number of foreign industrialists' [Bonner and Lambert, 1987: 351].

The Calico Printers Association (CPA) of Manchester was one such a ready foreign collaborator. As one of the largest British textile multi-national companies, it reflected the trend of the textile industry worldwide at the time to decentralize production to low wage areas of the world. Not only did it have investments in Egypt, Australia, the West Indies, India, Indonesia and China, but also required '. . . a lot of unskilled labour which can be taught simple working techniques without boosting production costs' (*The Mercury* 17/2/1949). This shifting of production was further facilitated by the relatively high degree of mechanization which the industry had attained, since this allowed it to take advantage of '. . . the attraction of and proximity to a great unskilled rural labour market' (*The Mercury* 17/2/1949).

However, as Mager [1987] has suggested, the issue of labour supply was not as uncomplicated as it might seem. Despite the presence of a large unemployed rural population around King William's Town, the idea of utilizing African male labour in textile production was a new and uncertain one. The expertise of two men who had pioneered the introduction of an African industrial workforce at Consolidated Textile Mills in East London was called on in 1944/5. Dr Wollheim (one of the two men) explained:

We suggested that the Zwelitsha mills should operate along similar lines to the Consolidated Textile Mills. This had a great effect on getting the mills off the ground . . . because there was a great deal of argument . . . [Mager 1987: 72].

The other major locational problem was the fact that there was no African township in the vicinity of the anticipated site, outside King William's Town, where suitable water (the Buffalo River has one of the lowest pH contents in the world), available ground and a plentiful supply of cheap labour were present.

Here, the developing alliance between the state (IDC) and international capital (CPA) provided its first demonstrable advantage for accumulation conditions at GHT. After negotiations between the IDC and the Department of Native Affairs,

. . . the area where the factory is to be built, locally known as the 'Grandstand Racecourse', will henceforth be named Zwelitsha, which is the Xhosa word for 'New Era'. Zwelitsha will be the new name of the big Native town on the west side of the road opposite the factory, which will be built (by the Department of Native Affairs) to accommodate the employees of the factory and their families (*The Mercury* 25/7/1946).

The involvement and participation of the state was at two central levels; that of Native Affairs, '. . . because the new industry presents the opportunity

for a new approach to the problem of landless Natives in the Reserves', and of the Department of Commerce and Industries, '... interested in the creation of key industries in rural areas which will attract other industries, ... and provide necessary employment' (*The Mercury* 25/7/1946; *Daily Dispatch* 24/7/1946). As a major social and economic engineering moment, the GHT-Zwelitsha experiment was to be an important example in future state strategies around bantustan development, and industrial decentralization strategies, and thus it was important for it to succeed. Considerable energies were expended on getting 'the project' going and sustaining it over time.

Van Eck (a Chairman of GHT) outlined very clearly the nature of the 'alliance' ...

The GHT undertaking on Native Land at Zwelitsha is an industry established by the co-operation of skilled overseas manufacturers (CPA), with high levels of expertise, and South Africa's IDC with local knowledge and an equal short-term share of capital running into millions of pounds. (The actual investment was £1,5 million) (*The Mercury* 1/11/1949, 26/4/1951).

By mid 1948, despite the completion of the buildings and the waiting consignment of cotton for the first training sessions of African operatives, the installation of machinery was continuing but '... rows of machinery housed in the plant for cleaning and preparing the raw cotton and spinning the thread (12 000 spindles) awaited final assembly and adjustments under the supervision of skilled engineers from the UK' (*The Mercury* 6/4/1948).

It was only by December 1948 that the first cloth, unbleached calico, was produced on a very limited scale at GHT. Only four of the 300 Lancashire semi-automated looms were operative in the weaving department; the other 296 were still being 'run-in' by experienced British technicians. These four looms, together with the appropriate and necessary cleaning, carding spinning and preparation stages were ...

'tended by Native youths and men and supervised by European instructors. Many were undergoing an entirely new experience, being trained in the most up-to-date textile mill in Africa' (*The Mercury* 21/12/1948).

By early 1949 GHT was working on a temporary 46 hour, five day week, as the process of running in machinery and training operatives continued. Four hundred and twenty operatives were employed by the year end, reflecting a significant expansion, but still well below 'profitable production levels. The problem remained one of linking operative training to production increases. Production was only inching forward. This related to delays in machinery supply and installation together with problems of water and electricity supplies, caused by construction delays in building water pipe systems, the mill reservoir and the 4 000hp electric power plant.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the slow pace of actual operative training; non-continuous production, breakdowns and early high labour turnover, meant many machines 'stood idle' and even those utilized were not reaching anywhere near maximum production levels.<sup>2</sup>

Through 1950 and 1951, the company was able to increase production substantially as many of the earlier limits and problems were resolved. Double shift work was introduced early in 1950, and the three-shift system soon fol-

lowed. The numbers of workers employed in the factory rose to 720 in 1950 and 1 060 in 1951. Production became more continuous and machines more fully utilized, labour turnover declined markedly, and breakdowns occurred less frequently, as the new experience of the factory floor became the known.<sup>3</sup>

GHT in common with the textile industry nationally and worldwide, was both large, employing a significant labour force, but also technologically relatively advanced [Hirsch, 1978]. While machine technology used at GHT initially was not as modern or competitive as that of advanced countries nevertheless it reflected a very large capital investment, and the highly mechanized nature of production. This had two central implications for the labour production process at GHT. Firstly, it meant that the potential labour supply could be, and of necessity for GHT, was unskilled, at least at the outset. But secondly it also meant that a certain level of skill was acquired. And in the context of a non-existent local operative labour market, these skills became highly valued and potentially irreplaceable for GHT management in the short term.

By 1951, with a fluctuating workforce of around 1 000, it was estimated that between 60 and 70% were 'landless rural natives', with many drawn from the 'kwedini gangs' and therefore very young (below 20 years old). Only 53 workers were drawn from Ginsberg Location, King William's Town's major urban township, and most of them constituted the entire complement of workers at GHT who had had 'previous factory experience'. Far more important for GHT management was to get the workforce 'in on the ground floor' to learn the discipline, the nature and the experience of the factory floor from the start (*The Mercury* 21/12/1948).<sup>4</sup> In this regard they would be young, eager, have lower expectations, and be less likely to complain, 'demand unions' or to strike. The Company also as a matter of 'importance' did not want to hire any of 'Kadalie's men' or their like. [presumably a reference to the 1948 strike at Frame in East London organized by 'ICU shop stewards'].<sup>5</sup>

Initially, the job required a minimum education level of Std 4, and the passing of dexterity tests and initial training tests, involving working on spinning machines in the factory. However, by 1950 the educational requirement had virtually dropped away and the priority was set on dexterity tests – though even those were overlooked 'if you knew someone who already had a job, a family or friend who needed a job and you had proved a good worker/'boy'.<sup>6</sup>

Training then occurred in the mill with workers becoming used in production 'within a few months'. While avoiding expensive training facilities and enabling the employment of unskilled workers, this process had the contradictory effect that time and money spent on in-training enabled comparatively rapid movement out of the unskilled level for many of the GHT workers. Initially this process was belied by an extremely high labour turnover but by 1950/1, the workforce had stabilized and workers' semi-skilled status increased their potential bargaining power.<sup>7</sup>

Of importance in determining the nature of the new workforce was the relationship between the Department of Native Affairs and GHT. The Department of Native Affairs was directly concerned,

. . . because the new industry present(ed) the opportunity for this new approach to the problem of the landless Natives in the reserves, giving him a job in his Ciskei home, and a place to live in a model new town[ship] ... and of keeping him there, and out of our cities (*The Mercury* 25/7/1946, 8/1/1948, 19/5/1951).

Not only was there direct state pressure for the employment of landless Ciskeians in the factory, but in Zwelitsha, built to accommodate the GHT workers, 'the landless rural natives . . . (were the) . . . class to get first consideration for houses' (*The Mercury* 19/6/1951).<sup>8</sup> By linking housing to landlessness, and given the nature and purpose of Zwelitsha, the state effectively linked landlessness to employment in GHT. In this way the Department of Native Affairs effectively intervened in defining the ethnic, gender, age and economic status of the new workers at GHT in a comprehensive 'package deal'. For Van Eck, Chairman of IDC and GHT, this 'necessary help' in defining the labour force was tied into

' . . . the revolutionary nature of the experiment represented by the creation of a native urban population based on industry in Native reserve territory'. As such it was not only a combined state-private industry venture, but a blueprint for decentralization of industry and planned regional development, and a test case for the workings of 'constructive apartheid' (*Daily Dispatch* 11/1/1952, 22/1/1952).

#### COWEN AND THE TWO YOUNG 'NATIVES' WHO USED TO SELL *THE MERCURY*?

However, many of these new residents of Zwelitsha were not so much landless as caught in the web of impoverishment, soil exhaustion and declining rural production and access to land. This meant that while the 'normal' mechanisms of homestead segmentation had been broken, land remained of limited availability through kinship (parent) links (*Daily Dispatch* 17/1/1952).<sup>9</sup> In the early 1950's at GHT, a significant part of the workforce 'had to go off regularly to plough. When the rains came, they had to go and plough'. This meant ' . . . that concerns of the land continued to play an important part in the lives and consciousness of this nascent industrial working class' [Mager, 1987: 127]. This process helped explain the exceptionally high levels of absenteeism and labour turnover at GHT in the early 1950's, especially when tied into working conditions in the factory, which was 'a terrible place to find oneself in as a youngster, new and frightening'.<sup>10</sup> In the countryside the realities were structurally equally frightening, but at least they were familiar.

But if at least some 'form' of attachment to land influenced the way the workplace was seen and occupied, in real structural terms these were alienated or dispossessed youths whose future lay in the 'freedom to choose' between an urban working class existence, or the 'hopelessness, desperation and poverty' of Ciskei's soil eroded hills and rural locations. There is little doubt they brought a consciousness infused with the concerns of Ciskei rural life; crops and cattle, fences and dipping-tanks, 'inheritance', marriage, land and

'manhood,' and anger, despair, and experience of white racial hostility.<sup>11</sup> But how did they intersect with the new class experiences of the factory and the location? One such intersection related to labour turnover, with a large number of initial 'recruits' leaving within a year for 'initiation into manhood', and not returning into 'boys' jobs [Hobart Houghton, 1960: 295]. Less obvious, but equally important influences were the ways that rural life fed directly into how 'sense' was made of factory work, and how it could and should be accommodated and changed and how life 'across the road' in the location should be structured.

By 1948, the first smoke from Zwelitsha chimneys marked the correspondence of its development to that of the factory. There were 125 families located in Zwelitsha, with 140 houses completed by September. By February 1949, 167 houses were occupied, housing approximately 1 200 people. In June 1951, there were 500 houses complete and occupied, with an official population of 2 327 people. By 1952 there were close to 800 houses completed and occupied, supporting a population of approximately 4 500 people. Many of the houses were occupied by single males, 'bachelors' working in the factory, but retaining 'connections' to the rural reserve areas. Others' occupants were fully proletarianized, but single and 'unsettled', still others 'only boys' looking for the 'cheapest' and least 'binding' accommodation. Four hostels were also built in Zwelitsha, across the road from the factory, each hostel designed to accommodate 24 workers, but actually housing 'twice that number'. (Hobart Houghton, 1960: 293-297; *The Mercury* 21/2/1948, 30/9/1948, 21/12/1952).<sup>12</sup>

It was the factory workers, together with about 700 construction workers and trade-school trainees employed in the construction of Zwelitsha itself, who comprised the 'industrial working population' on a day-to-day basis. These two groups formed an influential core of 'diverse origins . . . of displaced persons from White [sic] farms, small neighbouring urban areas, and landless people from the reserves' inhabiting Zwelitsha. Many of the other people were families of East London and Port Elizabeth weekly and monthly migrant workers, and a 'small percentage' worked in King William's Town. The 'middle class' was practically non-existent, with 1 school, 2 churches, a 'shopping centre' and 3 co-operative shops in 1952, and an 'invisible' white collar presence [Hobart Houghton, 1960: 293-297]. Equally, 'illegal activities' such as brewing and shebeens, prostitution, crime, and even hawking were described, and remembered, as minimal. Importantly, an extensive close rural network of 'drinking and socializing' was in operation amongst factory workers and Zwelitsha residents. This tying of 'leisure' into disintegrating rural communities, connected factory, location and 'kraal' physically and emotionally, in conversation and in thought. Thus it was not uncommon to dream of 'a night at Dyani's kraal' and spend the night talking of Harrison, looms and wages.<sup>13</sup>

At a fairly obvious level Zwelitsha fitted 'neatly' into the process of community formation by 'government decree', but this ignores the '. . . complex set of processes of internal structuring and development which combine to

give the 'township' its own character' [Bozzoli, 1987: 28, 1-43]. Here it was the factory class experiences and identities which were carried into Zwelitsha and moulded it into a 'community' in a markedly short space of time. This 'working class community' was not divided but reinforced, and broadened by its inter-connectedness with the surrounding rural areas, largely through its members' common concerns with rural dispossession and impoverishment and the actual reality of those processes in factory 'dependence'. Zwelitsha served as the melting pot of these two experiences of 'primitive accumulation' which

'would make anger, . . . it was a very good help to organize people, the way Zwelitsha was then, . . . clear and together [like a fist] behind us, part of the strike . . .' 'We [the striking men] could not have even begun without this mass support from the people . . . they were with us, all of them . . . it wouldn't be a lie'.<sup>14</sup>

It is to these men 'behind' the early years of development of the GHT Corporation (and in these early years, it was only men) – to Lampton Dwane, Henry Fazzie, Thomas Matshaba and Wallace Salmane, to the 'two young natives who used to sell *The Mercury*. . . tending ring frames in the spinning department, (*The Mercury* 21/12/1952) and to the hundreds of landless and impoverished African men on the factory floor, that we now turn. For not only were they the productive workers in GHT, but they were the workers exploited by exceptionally low wages. This was justified by their apparent and supposed unskilled, vulnerable and inexperienced nature.

Because of the semi-automated and highly mechanized form of production, the majority of the workers at GHT fell into semi-skilled or skilled positions, as opposed to an 'unskilled mass'. Wages, however, were not only fixed but remained 'bottomed', and were the lowest in the Union for the textile industry.<sup>15</sup> This was explained partly by the fact that GHT Mills, via the IDC

'had obtained exemption from the wage determinations covering the textile industry, it could pay its workers, young Africans, wages from 19/- to 41/- a week, much below the accepted rates. Deductions were made for rent, meals and tools' [Du Toit, 1978, 65].

But 'qualification' on the best terms was dependent on defining the Mills workforce as unskilled, performing simple working techniques. They could then 'legally' be paid accordingly. Production costs thus were kept to a minimum and the low cost of labour maintained. GHT's managing director Cowen elaborated:

'because of competition overseas it had been essential to establish the industry in an area like the Ciskei where there was a stable labour supply and a lower level of economic wages could make it possible for the industry to live and grow in competition with overseas' (*The Mercury* 3/7/1951).

The notion of 'unskilled' carried the meaning of class for GHTs workers. Drawn by the IDC and Native Affairs into factory work with lives shaped by managers and machine looms, and living amid the exhausting noise of 'trained' poverty, workers challenged the realities of factory work and the fact that their class position, as unskilled factory operatives, was determined by colour, age and education, and reinforced by the apartheid state by landlessness, township hostels and unjust employment laws. To be young, black, im-

mediately proletarianized and in possession of a standard two in the Ciskei hardly commanded respect on the labour market. The daily experiences of work demonstrated this:

It was so noisy, all the time, and hot, like fire and all the time the machines going . . . I was in the weaving section and had four looms, and for eight hours you wouldn't stop, from one to the next . . . I'm sure you would walk miles on one shift . . . If there was a fault, you know, you would want to leave it, because of bonuses . . . but you couldn't . . . it was hard man, and so tiring, that hooter was so important, you know.<sup>16</sup>

And all the time the production lines were under

' . . . the eyes of the spinning and weaving masters in their glassed-in offices on the sides of the departments . . . and the patrolling European supervisors' (*The Mercury* 3/7/1951).

This meaning of class was additionally characterised in the factory by the extension of the working day, in shift and overtime work and by the continual and successive attempts to intensify production. The operation of production or incentive bonuses, and a ranked differential piece rate system, although allowing wage 'increases' to the diligent, was by all accounts an 'extra pit-tance'. It was the most blatant way to push up productivity continuously with little effect on wages, beyond 'normal' rates.<sup>17</sup> For the workers this was recognisable extra appropriation. Added to high rates of exploitation, point of production experiences were crucial in shaping emerging worker identities as class identities, as were their 'empty pockets' at the end of shift. These working 'class' identities were shaded with tones of colour, community, rural origin, youth and male gender. In the spring of 1952 the dominant form of consciousness was a working class one, through which the other processes were refracted and were given 'meaning'.

#### 'TO FILL EMPTY STOMACHS': THE STRIKES, ORGANISATION AND ACTION

On Tuesday 19 June, 1951, *The Mercury* reported that

'Zwelitsha is experiencing its most serious labour trouble since it was established four years ago with all the thousand Native workers employed at the textile factory away from work, and 97 trainee artisans working in the town (Zwelitsha) refusing to leave the town after being discharged because they would not go to work' (*The Mercury* 19/6/1951).

The factory strike began at midnight on Sunday 17 June, when none of the workforce appeared to start the first shift of the week after the usual Sunday shut-down. So complete was the strike on Monday, that even domestic workers, 'the native cooks and housemaids', employed privately by members of GHT management living in company houses on the property, stayed away from work. Monday and Tuesday saw the entire workforce holding meetings and informal discussions on the veld under the bluegum tree next to the factory. The atmosphere was one of almost tangible excitement, but also one of caution and hesitancy. Stott, the mill manager argued that 'no European at the factory knew what the strike was about, and no deputation or reasons had been given for the strike'. The Labour Department and Department of Native



Affairs officials had also attempted to communicate with strikers, with 'no visible result' (*The Mercury* 19/6/1951, 21/6/1951).

In contrast, the African workers knew exactly what the strike was about, and why it was happening. The central issue was low wages, and deductions for rent, meals and tools. Prior to the strike, the issue of wages was continually raised in the factory, complaints to supervisors occurring almost daily. In the context of this growing dissatisfaction and opposition to low wages, and the intransigence of the GHT management, local organisation and leadership began to emerge.

'It started with talking – at work, in the (factory) hostels, in the houses, at home. At first I wasn't too sure, you know, this idea that we could change things, get more money and all that; but Lampton (Dwane) and others in the factory were sure. 'Stand together', they kept saying and then we did; it felt good, you know. About a month before the strike, they began to have meetings, at first very small, but then bigger, as the word spread, and I went. What we spoke at those meetings . . . it was the nothing wages for such hard work, and then it was the idea of a strike. Sundays were big meeting days and on Sunday, we talked and talked and it was decided. So we didn't go to work, all of us, that was a big moment for me'.<sup>18</sup>

It was also a big moment for the emergent factory leadership and for the other workers at GHT. The impetus for the strike received a significant boost from a building strike amongst construction workers on Wednesday 13 June. This strike involved 600 workers and 97 building trainees and only lasted one day (although the trainees strike continued for another week). For the textile workers, it was 'such a good example'. Dwane was involved in its organisation (*The Mercury* 19/5/1951, 21/6/1951).<sup>19</sup>

Late on Tuesday afternoon, a deputation from the strikers met with management about the low wages and poor working conditions in the factory. Backed by the unity of the strike and the massive support from the community, the deputation negotiated the need for wage revisions. They agreed to return to work, starting with the midnight shift on Wednesday, 'because the shift that started the strike had to be the one to finish it off' (*The Mercury* 21/6/1951). But in the minds of the majority of workers the strike was not over, only beginning. The problem was how to go forward.

This problem was addressed with the arrival of Gladstone Tshume, organizing secretary of the PE-Uitenhage branch of the ATWIU, in October 1951, and also by the frequent presence of Arnold Selby, general secretary of the union. A lay-preacher of the Bantu Methodist Church, and a member of the ANC, Tshume ' . . . always considered the workers to be the vanguard of the democratic movement . . .' [Du Toit, 1978: 133]. A local ATWIU branch was formed in November 1951, Lampton Dwane becoming the local secretary. A number of meetings were held in Ginsberg and Zwelitsha townships, and the local branch sent out letters to the workers, 'urging them to join the union if they wanted higher pay' (*The Mercury* 3/7/1952).

In particular the letters were addressed to foremen and clerks at the factory and warned them to

'Remember there are only two ways about it: you can only be with the workers or against the workers, and in that case you would be recognized as Enemy No 1 of the workers'.<sup>20</sup>

For the rest, the union was largely 'drawing in the converted'. By the end of the year, the union had 719 paid-up members, out of a total workforce of just over 900 workers.<sup>21</sup> Dwane was 'victimized' by the GHT employers, and was dismissed for his trade union activities. [Du Toit, 1978: 65]. This did not remove Dwane or stop union activity, especially meetings.

A set of very clear demands emerged out of these meetings, including the inaugural meetings of the ATWIU local branch, held in November in Zwelitsha and Ginsberg townships, and addressed by Tshume, Dwane and Selby. The 'bones of contention' were appalling rates of pay, high deductions (3s each, per week for rent, food coupons and tools), no sick pay, extra pay for night shift work, and unfair dismissals, both of Dwane and of 'workers who appear ill-clad or under-nourished'. These demands were submitted to management in November/December 1951.

The Company refused to consider the demands or to meet the union. Instead, management held an 'indaba' with the workers on December 7, when 'Mr Cowen explained that workers were getting good wages and the Corporation was acting in a friendly way by keeping the mill running when it was losing money heavily due to bad trade' (*The Mercury* 3/7/1952). This attempted paternalism not only fell on deaf ears, but management was 'shouted down' at the meeting.

For GHT workers, and the working class in King William's Town more generally, the role the local ATWIU and its organizers came to play was of great importance. The branch office was opened in Lampton Dwane's rooms, located in a cheap lodging house on the Market Square, owned by an Indian widow [Du Toit, 1978: 65]. The office also operated as the local ANC branch office, with Dwane as local organizer. Other leading organizers of the ATWIU, all factory workers at GHT, became equally important figures in the local ANC (*The Mercury* 3/7/1952).<sup>22</sup>

This local branch was vital,

'... we would go to the branch and it would always be just people; workers and others, women too, it was crazy there you know, and the discussions would go round and round, and always they would be saying, it is us, the workers who must be responsible, and who must be at the forefront of defiance and of the nationalist movement... it was the working class that must be leaders and the major group, and one day, James and I, we realized they were meaning us, not just them who could talk and argue like the devil... It was this that the union, and also Congress was and how it was so strong there. It became so that there was not one without the other'.<sup>23</sup>

The local ANC grew from the strike, and from the emergence of the local ATWIU branch. Initially this was at a leadership level, especially through Tshume, but thereafter the ANC gained support and membership amongst GHT workers. The interpenetration of the trade unions, the 'politics of the poor', and political movements in Port Elizabeth in the late 1940s, and early 1950s [Lodge, 1983: 50-52], was now translated into King William's Town. Support for the ANC was also growing in the rural areas at this time. Many of

the GHT workers identified with the idiom of 'land dispossession', and signed up.<sup>24</sup>

The experiences of the factory floor at GHT, with the incorporation of a fundamentally different labour process, led to a new form of class relations. Talk of worker struggles at the branch, in smaller informal meetings held in the hostels and houses of the workers, at the 'rural' shebeens, and at the union and Congress meetings, not only made sense, but was enthusiastically supported with cries of 'Afrika!'. ANC membership flourished amongst the GHT workers. A growing political and collective worker identification was simultaneously translated from above, and given meaning from below. This was not without tension and 'inexperience'. There remained a volatile mix of anger, frustration, and hope, in the content of the 'African' land and freedom struggle.

Arbitration remained a central concern. The threat of an April strike, made in March by Dwane, around the refusal of the Minister of Labour to appoint an arbitrator to settle the dispute after extensive meetings and discussions with the workers, received wide publicity in the local newspapers. This, together with continued pressure from the union nationally and in parliament, resulted in the Labour Department informing the union that 'the dispute was being referred to the Wage Board'. The strike was called off at meetings held on 20 April (*The Mercury* 22/4/1952).

The Wage Board began its investigation on 2 July 1952. It immediately became apparent that its acceptance by the union was a significant mistake. In the course of the Board's proceedings, Mr Cowen, the MD of GHT, argued that relations between management and workers had always been friendly, except for odd incidents, where 'instigators' had been involved. Since March, relations had again been friendly, he further suggested. In contrast, the workers' demands presented at the Wage Board not only included all those demands sent to management in November/December 1951, but now included annual leave and public holidays on pay, rest intervals, no fines or deductions from wages, and crucially, an end to retrenchments and the re-employment of retrenched workers [Du Toit, 1978: 66].

The recession in the textile industry, which began in 1951, seriously reduced the ability of GHT to compete with advanced countries, which reduced prices. By July 1952, GHT had 3 million yards of unsold cloth, representing five months output, with only 'half the plant . . . operating'. Starting at the end of February, retrenchments had begun, and by July, 650 workers remained, [66% of the total workforce]. Some 350 had been retrenched. The union, however, increased its presence in the factory, with a membership of about 500 out of the 650 workers still employed. Membership was also 'almost total' amongst those retrenched. Retrenchment was a major union issue for the GHT workers between March and August (*The Mercury* 3/7/1952; *Daily Dispatch* 4/7/1952).

After the failure of the Wage Board's enquiry, dissatisfaction rose as management consistently refused to address any of the issues of conflict.

'Towards the end of August the patience of the workers snapped and they came out on strike'.<sup>25</sup>

This strike began on Friday 22 August (as our introduction indicated) and initially involved the 'C' shift of about 250 workers, but by Monday had incorporated not only the entire workforce of over 750 workers, but also about 300 retrenched workers, who considered themselves as 'part of the workforce and of the strike' (*The Mercury* 26/8/1952). Over the weekend, meetings were held in Ginsberg and Zwelitsha townships. One union meeting, held in the Weir Hall, discussed both the strike and the necessary responses to the arrest on the first day of 53 workers. The meeting was followed by an 'unauthorized' ANC meeting outside, addressed by six local union/Congress leaders.

'At 1pm on Sunday there was a gathering of about 300 people . . . the 'Afrika!' sign was given at the meeting . . . [There] was an organized system to defy the authorities' (*The Mercury* 26/8/1952).

Later the six leaders were arrested on the road to Zwelitsha to address further meetings. One remembers

'Oh yes! The meetings were to make the link-up of the strike and the campaign of defiance which was only starting . . . the strike itself was the beginning of defiance here, you know . . . we were under 'unjust laws' at the factory . . .'<sup>26</sup>

On Monday morning, 250 to 300 workers gathered outside the factory gates, and demanded a meeting with Cowen, which was refused. The group of workers then moved off towards King William's Town, but 'stopped alongside the road and held a meeting'. What emerged from the meeting was a coordinated plan of 'civil disobedience', a march into town to the charge office, 'to get arrested' in support of the 53 workers arrested on Saturday.

'The march to town was so strong . . . together we walked and sang . . . all things, better jobs, more money, freedom, an end to unjust laws, they weren't songs really, just chants, over and over'.<sup>27</sup>

The workers reached town at about 11am and marched down Alexandria Road, 'showing the thumbs-up sign and shouting 'Afrika!'. They reformed at the corner near the charge-office and 'walked to the charge-office, some actually mounting some of the steps in front of the courthouse adjacent' (*The Mercury* 9/9/1952, 16/9/1952).

The evidence of Major AL Prinsloo, District Commander of Police, told something of the mood outside the court that morning. He said that at 11am he was waiting in the Magistrate's Office when

'he heard a commotion and shouts of Afrika! outside the Courthouse. He investigated and saw a lot of Natives congregated in front of the Courthouse. Amongst them he recognized some Zwelitsha strikers . . . He asked the Native what they wanted (after calling for an interpreter and the leader of the march) and the Native said they had come to be arrested. He called on his men in cars in front of the Courthouse to surround the Natives and he then told the Natives to disperse. The Natives took up a defiant attitude and there were shouts of 'We want to be arrested!' He then had his men arrest the Natives and march them off into custody . . . The demonstrators were arrested in a body and marched off under escort to the Mounted Police Camp in Amatola Row. As they walked away there were renewed shouts of 'Afrika!' among the Native spectators and the thumb-up sign was given' (as well as from those arrested) (*The Mercury* 9/9/1952).

All in all, 254 protestors were arrested and charged with 'congregating, shouting and creating a disturbance'. In addition, a further 83 out of those arrested were charged with 'illegal striking' under the (War Measure Proclamation). They appeared in court on Tuesday, August 26, and when bail was offered at 5 pounds each, on condition that they did not 'take part in meetings, gatherings or processions of any kind', this was met with cries and exclamations. When asked if they were prepared to pay bail, the response was a unanimous No!

The purpose of refusing bail was not only to show solidarity with the arrested strikers, but also to link the strike to the opening of the defiance campaign in King William's Town. Until the workers were tried, GHT would be without a workforce. Gladstone Tshume explained

'... the members of the local branch of the ATWIU had decided not to work at the Zwelitsha factory while the case against the strikers was on. As an organizer of the Union, it was his duty to see that decisions taken by the Union were carried out. It was his duty to convince people (those non-union members) to stay away from work' (*The Mercury* 16/9/1952).

The 254 workers, after spending the night under police guard in garages at the 'Mounted Police Camp', were transferred to East London by special train (with the 53 strikers arrested earlier), because the 'local gaol could not accommodate them'. The apartheid jails had been filled!

While contemporary popular memory of this period remains selective and 'political',<sup>28</sup> the link made between worker militancy and ANC support is well preserved in language, symbols, actions and observations. Management remembers 'ANC strike meetings' outside the gates, speakers under an ANC flag, and ANC slogans and songs loudly articulated. A white supervisor remembers striking workers waving ANC membership cards in his face as he arrived for work, and being confused, and angry, that this strike was 'mainly about their politics', and not 'the money'.<sup>29</sup> The newspapers carried images of worker gatherings that displayed more deeply ANC content, in opposition to the state. 'National' concern was expressed through the strike. Participants recall much of this. There was a discernible building process of strike action; 'leadership' influence; membership; and extension from strike demands towards mass action, through ANC ideology.<sup>30</sup>

Even if this process is over-drawn, and the influence from the 'merged' ATWIU/ANC leadership remained largely 'on the top', by the time of the 'defiance march' and mass arrests, the majority of strikers were \*\*\*?\*\*\* members. Their cards as well as their hands and voices bore testimony to this. But equally, the very action of mass protest, marching and defiance and arrest, signified a new and different moment in the proceedings of the strike. This was made possible by the influence and identification of workers as ANC members, and not simply striking workers. The related extension of the meaning of the strike beyond the immediate material concerns of its origins, meant that 'political voice' for economic wage and work inequalities was found in the dream of 'Afrika', and not the 'bargain' of the union, or the drawing of management's silences.

The strike lasted for a month, workers returning to work on Monday, 22 September 1952. For all that time

'... nearly 1 000 African workers, without any strike pay, living in an atmosphere of tension created by police armed with tommy-guns, kept the mill idle and maintained perfect discipline. For all that time they withstood the power of the state mobilized against them in their struggle with the employer'.<sup>31</sup>

GHT's response to the strike followed centered round two inter-related strategies. Both failed. The first was the issuing of notices at the factory, in the townships and in the local newspaper, stating that striking workers would be fired if they did not return to work by Tuesday, 2 September 1952. The other was the adoption after the start of the strike (and after receiving the necessary authorization and licence from the state) of a rural recruiting policy, in anticipation that the 'Return to Work' notices would be ineffective. The Company sent recruiting agents through the Transkei and Ciskei, 'where there was a mass of unemployed black workers, but not one of them accepted the jobs offered them. They had heard of the strike . . .' [Du Toit, 1978: 68]. It was suggested by one of the organizers in the 1950's that a central reason for this ineffectual recruiting policy was that the link between the strike and the ANC had been so clearly made. The ANC in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape was gaining a very large following around the issues of land dispossession and an end to racial domination. '... [A]ny move to break the strike 'was also a move against Congress, and that was just not on'.<sup>32</sup>

The Company, and the state attempted to build cases of intimidation against strike leaders. They ascribed the effectiveness of the strike to fear. They saw these charges as a method of removing leadership and weakening resistance. However, Tshume, Dwane, Dywele, Mfundisi and Sayona were all acquitted

'... they would not get anybody to hurt any striking worker, it wasn't necessary, the support was there, and also, it wasn't the way they did things'.<sup>33</sup>

Selby was arrested and charged, with Dwane, for 'the illegal collection of donations' for the striking workers, but they were found not guilty. The two of them, and other officials were also '... frequently arrested and detained for a few hours for questioning, and subsequently released because police could produce no charge against them'. Repression also extended beyond victimization of leaders. The meetings, the court appearances, and the factory premises were continually patrolled by the police, carrying batons and tommy (sten) guns. Workers were assaulted after their arrests, and attacked in their communities as the strike lengthened. [Du Toit, 1978: 69]

The 254 workers were found guilty of obstructing a sidewalk on August 25, and fined 3 pounds or 1 month's imprisonment with compulsory hard labour. One hundred and one paid their fines, the remaining 153 (including 82 charged with illegal striking) 'choosing' to go to jail. The strike case ended on Wednesday, 17 September, when the 132 strikers, charged with unlawfully going on strike, were found not guilty and discharged. The period from Monday 25 August, through to the end of the strike, late in September, was

marked with an orderly but 'staggered' and 'degenerated' return to work by the strikers.)

In the first few weeks 'meetings were held constantly' in Zwelitsha and Ginsberg. The big meetings consistently drew over a thousand workers (*The Mercury* 18/9/1952). The wages issue, which had given such a major impetus to the strike, remained a key factor. Increasingly the problems of shortages of money, lack of food, and starvation were voiced. The union had no material answers, despite strike collections locally and nationally [Du Toit, 1978]. One stop-gap measure that emerged was the continued link the workers retained with rural areas, finding expression in both food supplies and in refuge points. This was limited in effectiveness because of the poverty of the rural areas. However, at a political level, the union's answer was the workers' one – they were starving because of the factory and the government, not because of the union and the strike (*The Mercury* 9-20/9/1952).

This conception was strengthened by the responses of state and factory to the strike; the arrests, victimization and repression; the harassment of workers; the refusal of management to meet the workers or recognize their demands; the issuing of ultimatums; and the attempted recruitment of replacement workers. The overt 'hand-in-glove alliance' of capital and the state, in an attempt to 'crush the strikers and the strike', reinforced the linkages between national and working class politics for the workers and the residents of the King William's Town townships. It was not simply that they were Africans, but also that they were the 'boys' in the factories, on the scaffolds and the streets, and the 'maids' in the kitchens, that accounted for their domination.

In the end, hunger and starvation forced a return to work. The 'evil geniuses' and their accomplices who had orchestrated the whole affair were dismissed, and 'many became victims of the state' under the Suppression of Communism Act [Du Toit, 1978]. The union had not even met with management, let alone negotiated wage increases, and many workers (especially those still in jail for 'obstruction') lost their jobs.

In part, ironically, GHT survived the strike because overseas competition and declining markets had meant a massive accumulation of unsold cloth. The idle mill was manageable. This 'artificial relief' on minimum production also enabled the factory to dismiss 'troublesome' workers and to begin training new operatives. These processes obviously had major negative implications for the strikers, in the form of dismissals, non-recognition of the emergent union and its leadership, and in the return to work.<sup>34</sup>

The union did not build any viable structures, able to withstand the repression and removal of leaders. This was partly because of the above conditions and the effects of restrictive legislation on any form of union organization. This 'failure' was equally determined by the mix of an inexperienced, newly developed, local working class leadership; a loose, understaffed and voluntarist national union; and the unified, aggressive immediacy of worker support from within the factory and the community. Meetings, perhaps the only viable form of organization in the circumstances, did not address long term organi-

zation and its required structures. These class experiences weren't enough to fill 'empty stomachs'.<sup>35</sup>

#### AN EXAMPLE AND A FAILURE?

This localized case study reclaims a fragment of the past that could all too easily be forgotten and hidden. Arnold Selby of the ATWIU suggested in 1953 that "this strike was one of the biggest in South Africa's history, and certainly the biggest in recent years".<sup>36</sup> The strike merged into the opening, and single major act of the Defiance Campaign in King William's Town, as part of probably one of the most significant processes of popular mobilization undertaken by the ANC in the 1950's [Lodge, 1987]. The strike was more than worker or popular 'history-filler'.

The experience of the GHT factory, and strike, prefigured a number of characteristics of industrial development, problems of worker organization, and tensions of local class formation that were to be echoed 40 kilometers away in East London, through the 1950's and 1960's.

The textile industry after the war provided the blueprint for the import-substitution model of secondary industrialization in East London. In many ways GHT presaged the path and pattern of East London's industrialization process, often directly, but also in showing what was possible. The most important example was provided in the changing dimension of labour exploitation through the incorporation of male African instead of white male and female workers, as operatives. East London drew on the GHT experience through studies, consultations, site visits, and advice from GHT personnel [Minkley, 1989].

GHT rested heavily on the support and intervention of various apparatuses of the national state. The IDC provided capital and the necessary 'expertise' to ensure minimal wages; the Dept. of Native Affairs provided the direct conditions of 'satisfactory' labour reproduction in the Ciskei location. The various forms of labour legislation, including War Measure 145, and policing and 'arbitrary' arrests, all created more than the 'necessary and orderly conditions for capital accumulation' at GHT. Many of these dynamics of the apartheid state in operation were to reappear in the industrialization in East London. There, as at GHT, industrial development was seldom self-generative. It did not pulse on an entrepreneurial dynamic of its own. Without active state intervention through the Border Industries Programme, and the industrial decentralization strategies; without influx control, forced removals, bantustan independence and forced commuter 'urbanization', beginning in the 1950's, East London could not have developed as it did. On this, local industry agrees, as they do that the model was provided by GHT, as 'constructive apartheid' in economic practice. Future industrial decisions and strategies, state interventions and the creation of 'the right business conditions' in East London were projected out of the GHT experience. It laid the groundwork, as a social and economic engineering experiment, that was modified, expanded, and revised, as East London industrialized on a flimsy mix of foreign capital, undue state presence, and massive social upheaval [Minkley, 1989].



The GHT strike also anticipated an ideological and unintentional response, that is too often assumed, but seldom examined, in the literature on South African class formation. The close correspondence between class and race, drawn in the strike/defiance intersection, was rooted in an observable structural link between factory and government. Lines were clear, sides demarcated, and the experiences of tommy-guns, intimidation, Wage Board evasion, forced hostel life and space in Zwelitsha, and the 'illegality' of the strike, all confirmed the form of ownership of GHT as the corner-stone of 'constructive apartheid'.

The rapid emergence of a young male African workforce, and its equally rapid self-generative 'organization' and collective identification, was explicable in the meaning of work, where dismissals occurred because of 'wearing rags'. Workers could ill-afford any alternative on existing pay packets. The social base of popular radicalism/nationalism was made as much inside the factory, in class terrain proper, as in the loss of land, in bantustan-regulated communities, and in the exclusions, isolation and daily repression of apartheid. The workplace at GHT was directly responsible for the emergence of strands of a 'working class' directed political culture of nationalism. The class experiences of being a 'native weaver' were translated, compared to those of the white supervisor, and expressed in the 'thumbs-up' of the strike.

The literature on African Nationalism in South Africa tends to suggest that in the 1940's and 1950's there were two opposites growing side-by-side. On the one hand there was a growing working class, increasingly capable of emancipation from the past, attaining a class-based consciousness and form of organization in the trade unions; and on the other, nationalism, historically logically explicable in the realities of segregation and apartheid, and in the wider relations of 'colonial' domination. According to the literature this nationalism was either promoted from above by a middle class, or emerged, in different form, out of the pulses of 'popular class' pressure, from below. Whatever its radical content, however, it is said to have remained essentially separate from, and ultimately in opposition to, class struggles and consciousness [Lodge,1983,1987; Gerhart,1978]. The GHT strike suggests a much closer relationship between class and nation.

The class relations at GHT and the calling for 'iAfrika' were self-reinforcing and integrally related to each other. One group, or class, or ideology, was not the dominant force over another, in shaping this struggle for material and political well-being. The demands, the connections, and the evolution of the strike into defiance, came from within the same group of people and participants. Leaders articulated the real grievances and demands of the GHT workers. They made national links that were patently explicable to all.

An effective and dynamic local worker leadership was thrown up by the conflict within GHT. This leadership extended beyond the local ATWIU branch to the core leadership of the local ANC. The ANC in King William's Town developed a solid GHT worker base. National and worker political issues were not only linked but fed into each other. This questions the 'traditional' view of the ANC in the region as being largely 'middle class' and

'Africanist' [Lodge, 1987 outlines the basis and source of this interpretation]. It suggests the need for a more careful analysis.

New factory/township relations intersected the people's lives, added to their identities forged in struggle for family and land, and a different sense of collective belonging and hope emerged. It would be exaggerated to label this 'working class nationalism', but the term captures the content and direction of the strike. The 'unjust law' of the factory was a new extension of apartheid society, and like apartheid itself, was seen to exploit all black people who were the workers in a real sense.

The biggest and longest strike in the East London region sits uneasily together with the 1952 riots, as one of the two most explicitly political acts undertaken by black working [and unemployed] people until the 1970's. As the effects of the 1952 'riots' were 'felt' in East London's communities, the effects of the strike similarly laid the patterns, built the disillusion and formed the framework of future labour struggles. Strikes in the 1950's were severely repressed. Management and the state were closely allied. They singularly refused to engage representative worker leaders and demands. A potentially important rooting of worker struggles into a radical nationalism, a shaping of that nationalism in working class terms, was broken in popular memory and consciousness. Workers remember the 1952 strike as 'the one that failed', a memory fueled by the state, and encouraged by the local media. This memory, this very real sense of failure, must be taken very seriously in explaining the later strategies that emerged amongst political activists, unionists, employers and the state in the region. We should remember defeat, and begin to analyse and appreciate its significance in practise and consciousness.

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#### NOTES

1. Company Archive, GHT, Minutes of Meetings, 1949, 1950.
2. Company Archive, Minutes, 1949, 1950.
3. Company Archive, Minutes, 1950, 1951. Interview, Production Manager, December, 1986.
4. Company Archives, Interview, Mr. D, December, 1986.
5. Interview, Thomas K, December, 1988.
6. Interview, T.M., and J.T.K., December, 1986.
7. Company Archive, GHT, Minutes of Meetings, 1951, 1952.
8. Company Records, correspondence with NAD.
9. Interviews, Alfred N, Thomas K., December, 1986.
10. Interview, Alfred N., December, 1986.
11. Interviews, 18 GHT workers, 1986.
12. Interviews, J.T.K., and T.J., December, 1986.

13. Interview, Alfred N, and J.T.K., and others, December, 1986.
14. Interview, W.S., December, 1988.
15. Average Wages per Week (pounds)

|                           | Africans | Whites  |
|---------------------------|----------|---------|
| King William's Town (GHT) | £1.9.5   | £10.0.0 |
| Ladysmith                 | £1.16.0  | £14.0.0 |
| Paarl                     | £2.0.9   | £9.6.6  |
| Benoni                    | £3.2.0   | £15.2.0 |

Derived from the Board of Commerce and Industry, p.34.

16. Interview, T.M., December, 1986.
17. Interviews, December, 1986.
18. Interview, W.S., December, 1986.
19. Interview, W.S., December, 1986.
20. ATWIU Minutes, 1952, p.3, Wits University Archives.
21. ATWIU Minutes, 1952, p.3.
22. Interviews, December, 1986.
23. Interview, W.S., December, 1986.
24. Interviews with GHT workers, December 1986
25. ATWIU Minutes, including a report by A. Selby, undated, p.4.
26. Interview, W.S., December, 1986.
27. Interviews, Alfred N, Thomas K, T.M., December, 1986.
28. The work of the Popular Memory Group in the 'Making Histories' collection edited by Johnson, R, et al [London 1982] contextualizes the bias and nature of popular memory as a selective process.
29. Interviews, GHT Management, Dec 1986.
30. Interviews conducted with a group of workers at GHT, who were participants, as well as others who themselves had been told about the strike, December, 1986.
31. ATWIU Report, 1953, p.3.
32. Interview, T.M., December, 1986.
33. Interview, Alfred N, December, 1986.
34. Company Archives, Report on the strike, 1953.
35. Interview, J.T.K., December, 1986.
36. ATWIU Records, Executive Council Report, 1953.

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